

Canadian Ethnocultural Diversity and Federal Party Support: The Dynamics of Liberal Partisanship in Immigrant Communities

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The popularity of the Liberal Party of Canada among Canadians with origins in Asia, Africa, and South America is one of the most striking and significant patterns of partisan support in the country over the last several decades. Since the late 1960s, this diverse group of citizens, the overwhelming majority of which is foreign-born, has been more likely than any other to vote for and to identify with the Liberals (Blais 2005; Bilodeau and Kanji 2010; White and Bilodeau 2014). The voting choices of this segment of the electorate have a greater impact on federal election outcomes now more than ever. With each new election, immigrants from the Global South represent a larger share of the voting public. Canada's growing foreign-born population now comes largely from Asian countries rather than the erstwhile predominant sources in Europe and the United States. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, 82% of immigrants who arrived between 2006 and 2011 came from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, or South America, compared to only 15.8% of those who immigrated before the 1970s (Statistics Canada 2013).

This pattern of party support is familiar to many students of Canadian politics, but the roots of Liberal success among "new Canadians" have been difficult to pinpoint so far. This article, an examination of more than four decades of data from the Canadian Election Studies,¹ points to early political resocialization in Canada as the major source of Liberal support among immigrants from the Global South: by and large, each new immigration cohort has developed partisan ties that are more durably Liberal than previous cohorts. This addition of successive waves of newcomers who are systematically more inclined towards the Liberals explains the growing gap in Liberal partisanship between immigrants from the Global South and other Canadians.

A WIDENING PARTISAN CLEAVAGE

A growing body of research examines theories about the roots of Liberal support among Canadians with origins in the Global South, but to date there is scant evidence to substantiate any of these explanations. Incumbency effects—both at the national and local constituency levels—have been effectively

ruled out as an explanation (Blais 2005; White and Bilodeau 2014). There are no signs of a distinctive ideological fit between the Liberals and immigrants from the Global South and later generations of Canadians with similar backgrounds (Blais 2005; Harell 2012), nor do unique interests or issue positions (particularly on immigration-related matters) account for Liberal success within those communities (Blais 2005; Bilodeau and Kanji 2010). Party outreach and mobilization also seems to fall short as an explanation, as other parties have competed vigorously with the Liberals for support in minority ethnocultural communities for decades (Stasiulis and Abu-Laban 1991; Marwah, Triadafilopoulos, and White 2013).

Less attention has been paid to *trends* in Liberal support among Canadians from the Global South since the late 1960s, particularly its marked departure from the dynamics in Liberal support among other Canadians. These divergent trends are illustrated in figure 1, which shows the proportion of Canadian-born, US/European immigrants, and immigrants from the Global South who identify with the Liberals rather than another party. Within each group we see short-term fluctuations in Liberal partisanship, but whereas Liberal partisanship has shown a long-term decline within the Canadian-born and US/European immigrant groups, it has shown a long-term growth among immigrants from the Global South.

Why, over the last four decades or more, have such clear partisan differences gradually emerged between immigrants from the Global South and other Canadians, including immigrants from other parts of the world? Partisan identities are viewed as relatively stable political orientations, and the incremental shifts in party identification like those illustrated above raise the prospect of cohort effects, where the early, shared experiences of new generations of citizens lead them to develop stable partisan identities different from those of older generations (Beck 1974). Although research on generational differences in party identification typically has native-born populations in mind, it is possible that emerging cohort differences—and gradual cohort replacement—explain increasing Liberal identification among immigrants from the Global South. Identification with the Liberals over other federal parties may have grown with the addition of successive

waves of newcomers, each more durably Liberal than the previous one, combined with the natural exit of older cohorts who were less Liberal in their partisanship.

Evidence

The Canadian Election Studies make it possible to assess the effects of cohort replacement. Each of these nationally representative surveys includes comparable indicators of each respondent's year of birth, place of birth, year of arrival (for those

States and Europe. The difference in probabilities of Liberal identification between those who arrived in 1950 and 2000 is a modest .05 (.45 versus .50, respectively), and the effect of year of arrival is statistically insignificant.

To assess the impact of cohort replacement on Liberal partisanship, the actual time trend from 1968 to 2011 is compared to a counterfactual condition in which there is no cohort replacement during that period. The estimated probabilities of identifying with the Liberals are calculated across time for

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born outside Canada), and whether or not they voted in the election. Data from a total of 12 surveys gathered at different time points over a 43-year timespan make it possible to distinguish the effects of year of immigration from those of two other factors: the timing of the survey (period effects) and the age of the immigrant. Moreover, when multiple surveys are combined, they contain a sufficient number of foreign-born respondents to generate reliable estimates of the effects of year of immigration for immigrants from the Global South and a comparison group, immigrants from the US and Europe.

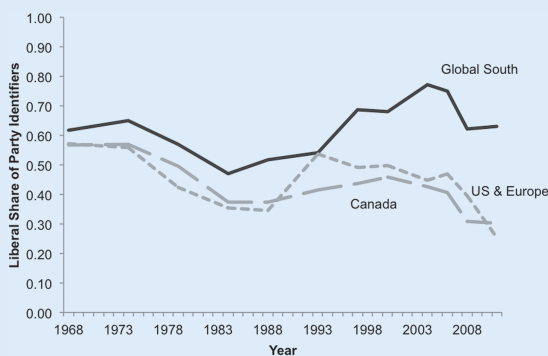
The estimated effects of *year of immigration* are illustrated in figure 2. In both sets of estimates, the effects of the year of survey and age are held constant.² Immigrants from the Global South who arrived in Canada more recently exhibit a greater propensity to identify with the Liberals than those who arrived earlier: for example, the estimated probability of identifying with the Liberal Party among those who arrived in 1950 is .54, but increases to .75 among those who arrived in 2000. Year of immigration has virtually no impact on the propensity to identify with the Liberals of immigrants from the United

two different models: one in which each individual's year of immigration is not held constant, and instead takes on its observed value, and another in which year of immigration is held constant at its mean value in 1968.³

Figure 3 shows the estimated probabilities of Liberal identification for these two scenarios, among immigrants from the Global South. The solid line, representing the trend in Liberal partisanship holding only the effects of age constant, indicates Liberal identification has increased by just over three percentage points per decade. However, the trend virtually disappears when the effects of cohort replacement are also controlled. Setting aside the systematic cohort differences in Liberal identification reveals a modest and negative net trend (a decrease of less than a percentage point per decade), which is statistically indistinguishable from zero.

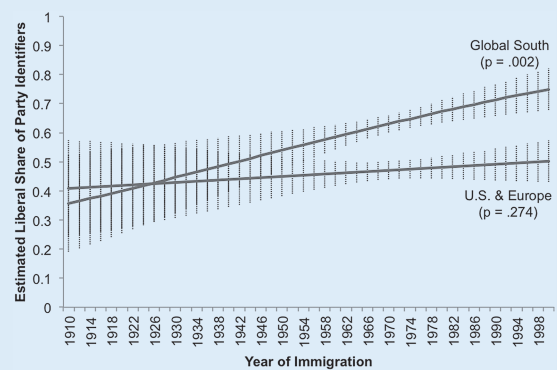
Perhaps not surprisingly, given the absence of cohort differences, cohort replacement has no discernible effect on the negative trend in Liberal identification among immigrants from the

Figure 1
Proportion of Party Identifiers who are Liberal, by Place of Birth, 1968–2011



Source: Canadian Election Studies Data

Figure 2
Predicted Probability of Liberal Identification by Year of Immigration and Place of Birth



Source: Canadian Election Studies Data

United States and Europe. The results presented in figure 4 indicate that without taking into account the independent effects of replacement, Liberal identification has declined by just under three percentage points per decade. The net trend with year of immigration controlled is very similar, showing a decline in Liberal identification of slightly less than four points.

The evidence, then, is consistent with the idea that the shift towards Liberal partisanship among immigrants from the Global South is driven by cohort replacement. But what

However, the year of immigration has a significant and slightly stronger effect on the propensity to identify with the Liberals even when income and education levels are taken into account. Changes in the socioeconomic composition of immigration cohorts, then, cannot explain the cohort effect.

Concluding Discussion

Blais (2005), finding no other compelling explanation for Liberal support among Canadians from Asian, African, and

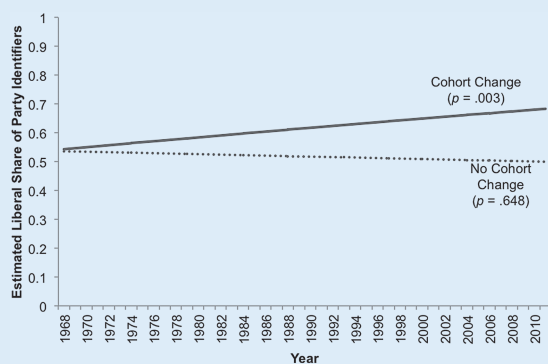
Perhaps the growth in Liberal identification has less to do with party mobilization, ideology, or interests, and more to do with these settlement patterns, as successive cohorts of new immigrants have taken up residence in places where they encounter, and are influenced by, more and more people who favor the Liberals over other parties.

precisely has caused these cohort differences? A different look at the data effectively rules out at least two avenues of investigation. First, there are no indications that a particular event—or series of events—served as a catalyst for these cohort changes. When party identifications shift dramatically, the change is often the consequence of pointed differences in political socialization between new generations and their older counterparts, as new generations are exposed to events that pull them away from parties supported by previous generations. That does not appear to be the case when it comes to immigrants from the Global South. When the measure of year of immigration is replaced with a series of variables capturing the decade of arrival, the pattern of increasing Liberal identification is linear, without any sharp discontinuities. Significant changes in composition of the immigrants from the Global South over the 1968–2011 period do not appear to account for the cohort effect, either. We know, for example, that more recent immigrant arrivals in Canada have higher levels of education than those in the past (Li 2003).

Latin American backgrounds, suggests more attention ought to be paid to the link between social forces and party support. He notes that, although the sociological approach to public opinion and voting behavior has fallen out of favor, “we miss something important if we do not examine the group bases of party support” (Blais 2005, 834).

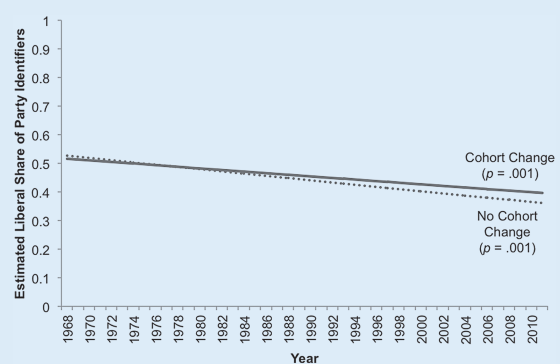
In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the role of social influence in shaping public opinion, political behavior, and partisan identities. A key assertion is that social influence generates conformity in political outlooks within largely homogeneous and relatively closed social networks (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004). Immigrants in Canada, especially more recent ones, are more likely than many other Canadians to be situated in these kinds of networks. For decades, the overwhelming majority of newcomers have settled in just three large metropolitan areas—Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal—and in neighborhoods populated by other immigrants from similar backgrounds (Hiebert 2009, 29). Perhaps the growth in Liberal

Figure 3
The Impact of Immigrant Cohort Replacement on Liberal Identification, Global South Immigrants



Source: Canadian Election Studies Data

Figure 4
The Impact of Immigrant Cohort Replacement on Liberal Identification, US/European Immigrants



Source: Canadian Election Studies Data

identification has less to do with party mobilization, ideology, or interests, and more to do with these settlement patterns, as successive cohorts of new immigrants have taken up residence in places where they encounter, and are influenced by, more and more people who favor the Liberals over other parties.

The evidence of cohort effects presented here generates at least two implications for future research. First, given that the trend toward the Liberals among immigrants from the Global South began at least as early as the 1960s, the search for the deeper explanation for this pattern—the answer to the question “why the Liberals, and not some other party?”—could well be buried in the past. Possibly, the Liberal Party’s very early efforts to reach out to and mobilize newcomers were a catalyst. Although the major parties have all vied for the support of members of minority ethno-cultural communities for decades, the Liberals were the first to do this, working harder than other parties in the 1950s and 1960s to recruit supporters in new immigrant communities (Carty, Cross, and Young 2000). However, comprehensive, empirical verification of the impact of those early efforts is likely to remain elusive. The data simply are not there to gather.

Second, if we are to understand the attitudes and behavior of the growing foreign-born segment of the Canadian electorate, we need to turn our attention to the role of social communication and interpersonal influence. Taking greater notice of the social bases of party support is essential not because immigrants are inherently more susceptible than other Canadians to interpersonal influence, but because immigrants’ patterns of settlement suggest the impact of interpersonal influence may well be greater for them than for other Canadians. Indeed, perhaps there should be a renewed focus on the link between interpersonal influence and Canadian political attitudes more generally. The old view that, historically, party support is only weakly related to Canadians’ social characteristics has been challenged recently (Johnston 2012), and the emergence of a durable and widening cleavage between Canadians from backgrounds in the Global South and those from other backgrounds suggests social groups are still important in Canadian politics. ■

NOTES

1. Meisel (1969); Clarke et al. (1982); Lambert et al. (1984); Johnston et al. (1992, 1995); Blais et al. (2000, 2004); Gidengil et al. (2009). The 1979 Canadian National Election Study and the 2006 and 2008 Canadian Election Studies included panel components. These panel respondents have been excluded from the analysis. The 1980 Canadian National Election Study (all panel respondents) are excluded. The original collectors of these data no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.
2. Estimates derived from binary logit models, where the dependent variable, Liberal identification, is a dichotomous (1 = Liberal identification, and 0 = identification with another party), and the independent variables (age in years, year of immigration, and year of survey) are continuous variables. Predicted probabilities and confidence intervals calculated using Long and Freese’s (2014) *SPost* collection of Stata commands. In these calculations, age and year of survey are held constant at their means.
3. Estimates derived from two binary logit models, with (model 1) and without (model 2) year of immigration as an independent variable. In calculations for the model 1, age is held constant at its mean and year of immigration is held constant at the mean value for the 1968 survey. In calculations for model 2 of immigration, age is held constant at its mean.

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